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# The conceit of deceit

How people make up good reasons for bad behaviour

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YOU are deciding between two magazines to read. The one you choose just happens to feature photos of women in very small swimsuits. But you do not, you claim, pick that particular magazine for the bathing beauties; it happens to have more interesting articles, or better coverage of copper mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. You will say this even in the midst of a lab experiment that has been set up so that the only possible difference between the two magazines is the presence (or absence) of swimsuits.

Such was the finding of Zoë Chance, a doctoral student, and Michael Norton, a marketing professor, both at Harvard Business School. The pair were investigating how people justify “questionable” behaviour (Mr Norton's word) to themselves after the fact. They asked 23 male students to choose between two sports magazines, one with broader coverage and one with more feature articles. The magazine which also happened to contain a special swimsuit issue was picked three-quarters of the time, regardless of the other content. But asked why they chose that particular magazine, the subjects pointed to either the sports coverage or the greater number of features—whichever happened to accompany the bikinis.

This may not seem surprising: the joke about reading *Playboy* for the articles is so old Ms Chance and Mr Norton borrowed it for the title of their working paper. But it is the latest in a series of experiments exploring how people behave in ways they think might be frowned upon, and then explain how their motives are actually squeaky clean. Managers, for example, have been found to favour male applicants at hypothetical job interviews by claiming

that they were searching for a candidate with either greater education or greater experience, depending on the attribute with which the man could trump the woman. In another experiment, people chose to watch a movie in a room already occupied by a person in a wheelchair when an adjoining room was showing the same film, but decamped when the movie in the next room was different (thus being able to claim that they were not avoiding the disabled person but just choosing a different film to watch). As Ms Chance puts it: "People will do what they want to do, and then find reasons to support it."

### **Only fooling yourself**

Further compounding the problem, Ms Chance and Mr Norton's subjects, like the subjects of the similar experiments, showed little sign of being aware that they were merely using a socially acceptable justification to look at women in swimsuits. Mr Norton reports that when he informs participants that they were acting for different reasons than they claimed, they often react with disbelief.

Such research suggests how hard it is for companies to get bias out of hiring decisions. Indeed, even if you inform people ahead of time that they will be held accountable for potential bias, they react not by becoming more fair-minded, but by looking even more closely for potential acceptable justifications. Anti-discrimination laws may thus be leading, in some cases, not to more diverse workplaces but to more convincing explanations of bias on the part of managers.

If accountability enhances, rather than reduces, bias, what is the alternative? The authors suggest submitting to a rigid set of criteria before seeing any of the possibilities, and sticking to it. Do this, Ms Chance suggests, and managers might be more likely to notice when they are changing emphasis on a socially acceptable criterion (say, years of work experience) or if a less acceptable one is involved (sex or race). But both authors admit this is easier said than done: people generally prefer more flexibility in their decision-

making.

The implications of self-deception go beyond hiring. Mr Norton and Ms Chance have found elsewhere that people will actually forget having made difficult decisions. Government, commentators and the public have spent much of the last year demanding to know how employees of such firms as Lehman Brothers and AIG could make such catastrophic financial decisions. Perhaps the bankers no longer remember; or perhaps they had perfectly good reasons at the time.

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